SPORT

'Magical' Dembele brace fires PSG top

PARIS: Ousmane Dembele scored twice as champions Paris Saint-Germain climbed top of Ligue 1 on Friday with a dominant 3-0 win over Lille at a rainy Parc des Princes.

Surprise packages Lens could return to the summit should they win their game in hand, but PSG coach Luis Enrique will be buoyed by a return to form from his top striker.

Dembele won the Ballon d'Or last season but has suffered an injury-blighted season so far.

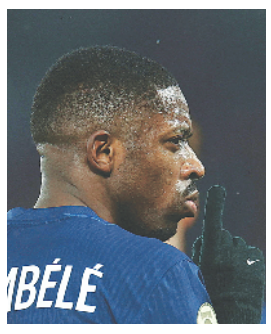
His goals, including a stunning lob, on Friday will hearten the PSG faithful, however.

A confident Dembele curled a sweet left-footed shot into the bottom corner from outside the box on 13 minutes to open the scoring.

He then chipped Lille goalkeeper Berke Ozer from inside the box for a sumptuous second just after the hour mark.

"That's the magic of Ousmane, he can do anything, he's just brilliant," said team-mate Warren Zaire-Emery after the game.

Bradley Barcola, a late substitute for an industrious but misfiring Khvicha Kvaratskhelia, clipped home the third in stoppage time, pouncing on a defensive mix-up that left him with only Ozer to beat.



PARIS: Paris St Germain's Ousmane Dembele celebrates scoring during the Ligue 1 match against Lille at Parc des Princes Stadium.—Reuters

PSG goalkeeper Lucas Chevalier had little to deal with over the 90 minutes.

Fourth-placed Lille harried PSG into spilling several loose balls, one of which offered a half-chance to veteran Olivier Giroud, who chipped the ball onto the bar for an agonising near miss when they were only 1-0 down.

PSG started with Dembele, Desire Doue and Kvaratskhelia in a line up similar to the one that beat Inter Milan in the Champions League final last May, but were missing key defender Achraf Hakimi, who will play in the African Cup of Nations final for Morocco on Sunday.

The Parisians won the league by 19 points last season but Lens have strung together a nine-match winning run in all competitions to keep pace with the European champions this season.—AFP

MADRID: Real Madrid's Kylian Mbappe is fouled by Adrian De La Fuente of Levante during their La Liga match at Santiago Bernabeu on Saturday.—AFP

Mbappe, Asencio strike as Real calm storm with Levante win

MADRID: Real Madrid ended a turbulent week with a much-needed 2-0 win over relegation-threatened Levante on Saturday, courtesy of second-half goals from Kylian Mbappe and Raul Asencio, after being met with boos from a restless Bernabeu crowd before the breakthrough arrived.

The win snapped Real's two-match losing run and offered brief respite after a bruising week. They looked flat in the first half, still carrying the scars of Sunday's 3-2 Spanish Super Cup final defeat to rivals Barcelona, followed by the departure of manager Xabi Alonso the next day and a shock 3-2 Copa del Rey exit to second-division Albacete on Wednesday.

Boos greeted the players at kick-off, with sections of the crowd also directing chants at club president Florentino Perez. Star players Vinicius Junior and Jude Bellingham came in for ire from the home fans after a disastrous week.

Real finally eased the tension when Adrian de la Fuente tripped Mbappe in the box, and the French forward, was spared the jeers, converted the penalty in the 58th minute to extend his league-leading tally to 19 goals.

Mbappe, who appeared in pain in the warm up after a collision with team-mate Dean Huijsen, had been expected to return for the Champions League game against Monaco next week as he manages his recovery from a knee sprain.

Seven minutes later, Real doubled their advantage through centre-back Asencio, who rose to meet Arda Guler's corner with a powerful header to make it 2-0 in the 65th minute, giving new coach Alvaro Arbeloa a crucial cushion and settling the mood inside the stadium.

"Today was a very important day, playing in front of our fans, we wanted to turn around the situation," Asencio told Real Madrid TV. "What happened at Albacete should not have happened, we felt guilty and we wanted to make things better. The team gave a good account of themselves, above all in the second half. He [Arbeloa] asks us to enjoy ourselves -- to be protagonists, to dominate, to focus on ourselves and not on the opposition. Little by little, we'll get there."

The win keeps Real second in La Liga on 48 points from 20 matches, one behind leaders Barcelona, who have a game in hand and visit Real Sociedad on Sunday. Levante are 19th with 14 points.—Agencies

Inter set title race pace with victory at Udinese

UDINE: Lautaro Martinez made sure that Inter Milan put pressure on their Serie A title rivals with the only goal in Saturday's 1-0 win at Udinese which provisionally extended his team's league lead to six points.

Martinez expertly poked home the winner in the 20th minute in Udine to continue Inter's eight-match unbeaten run in Italy's top flight.

Inter have collected 25 points from a possible 27 since losing the Milan derby the end of November and again showed a ruthlessness in dispatching the also-rans that both AC Milan and Napoli have lacked.

Inter move to 49 points, six ahead of Milan who play Lecce at home on Sunday, with third-placed Napoli on 40 points with a game in hand. Udinese remain 10th in the standings on 26 points.

The game, like all Serie A fixtures this weekend, was preceded by a minute's silence in memory of Fiorentina owner Rocco Commisso whose death was announced earlier on Saturday.

The visitors were on the attack from the off and went ahead through Martinez but, despite dominating the game, Inter were unable to find any further goals.

Second-placed Milan host Lecce on Sunday night with a six-point gap separating them from local rivals Inter even though the seven-time European champions haven't lost since the opening day of the season.

Massimiliano Allegri's side have dropped a host of points to teams they should beat, starting back in August against Jamie Vardy's Cremonese who remain the only team to get three points from Milan.

Inter meanwhile have the opposite problem, with a poor track record in matches against high-profile opposition, a weakness which will be tested by Premier League leaders Arsenal on Tuesday night.

UDINE: Inter Milan's Lautaro Martinez shoots to score during the Serie A match against Udinese at the Bluenergy Stadium on Saturday.—Reuters

Four straight wins at the start of the league phase of the Champions League were followed up by two defeats which have left direct qualification for the last-16 in doubt.—Agencies

Last-gasp Can penalty gives Dortmund win against St Pauli

BERLIN: An Emre Can penalty in the fifth minute of stoppage time saved Borussia Dortmund's blushes in a 3-2 home win against lowly St Pauli in the Bundesliga on Saturday.

Dortmund were cruising when Julian Brandt and Karim Adeyemi scored either side of half-time but St Pauli hit back with goals by James Sands and Ricky-Jade Jones inside the space of 10 minutes.

In the dying moments, VAR found a foul on Germany forward Maximilian Beier, bringing Dortmund captain Can to the spot.

The win helped Dortmund, who travel to Tottenham Hotspur in the Champions League next week, cut the gap to Bayern Munich to eight points, but the league leaders can restore their 11-point buffer by winning their game in hand..

With German chancellor and Dortmund fan Friedrich Merz watching from the home VIP box, the hosts overcame a poor first half when Brandt tapped in from a Karim Adeyemi cutback just before the break.

Adeyemi turned scorer in the 54th, slotting in from Fabio Silva's well-timed assist to make it 2-0 but that was the end of Dortmund's attacking game.

St Pauli's Sands headed in from a corner in the 62nd to cut the deficit before Jones volleyed in from another set piece, this time a freekick.

Deep into stoppage time, Jones caught Beier on the edge of the penalty area, allowing Can to convert nervelessly from the spot.

Elsewhere, Hoffenheim's Wouter Burger scored the only goal in a 1-0 home win over flailing Bayer Leverkusen to climb to third in the table.

Burger swung in an excellent free-kick after nine minutes to give the hosts the three points.

Relegation candidates last season, Hoffenheim are on track to qualify for Europe's top competition for just the second time in their history, having last done so under now-Germany coach Julian Nagelsmann in 2017/18.

Leverkusen have now lost four of their past six, falling three points behind the Champions League placings.

Cologne beat Mainz 2-1 at home, VfL Wolfsburg played out a 1-1 draw with Heidenheim and hosts Hamburg were held to a scoreless draw by Borussia Moenchengladbach.

On Friday, Ansgar Knauff scored in the fourth minute of stoppage time to snatch a point for seventh-placed Eintracht Frankfurt in a 3-3 draw at Werder Bremen.—Agencies

Andreeva mows down Mboko in all-teen battle to win Adelaide title

MELBOURNE: World number eight Mirra Andreeva warmed up for the Australian Open with a comfortable 6-3, 6-1 victory over fellow teenager Victoria Mboko in the Adelaide International final on Saturday to claim her fourth WTA Tour title.

The 18-year-old Russian, who won back-to-back WTA 1000 titles last year in Dubai and Indian Wells, will meet Paris Olympics silver medallist Donna Vekic in the opening round at Melbourne Park.

Mboko, 19, raced to a 3-0 lead but Andreeva turned the tables to reel off the next six games to take the opening set.

It was one-way traffic in the second set as Andreeva broke early to take the opening three games and sealed the match on serve, setting herself up perfectly for the year's opening Grand Slam, which begins on Sunday.

Andreeva joked at the presentation ceremony that her team, which includes coach and former world number two Conchita Martinez, had little to do with her win.

"I do feel like it was all me," she said. "I've been practising a lot. I've been working, sweating, and I don't even know why you're here, honestly. "I want to thank myself for being brave in all the matches I played. I want to thank myself for pushing myself every day in practice ... I want to thank myself for changing my mentality for fighting till the very last point.

"For doing what I've got to, doing what my team tells me to do, sometimes with complaining, but its OK."

Canadian Mboko took a medical timeout midway through the match. The world number 17, who became the youngest player since Serena Williams to beat four major champions in an event on the way to winning last year's Canadian Open, faces Australian Emerson Jones in her Melbourne Park opener.

"Unfortunately, I could not be 100 percent today," said Mboko, who struck 29 unforced errors and lost serve five times. "But Mirra played incredible."

In the men's final, Tomas Machac claimed the second title of his career as he outlasted France's Ugo Humbert 6-4, 6-7 (2/7), 6-2.

MENSIK BLASTS TO AUCKLAND TITLE

In Auckland, rising Czech star Jakub Mensik beat Sebastian Baez 6-3, 7-6 (9/7) to collect his second ATP title after his breakthrough triumph at last year's Miami Open, where the 20-year-old beat mentor Novak Djokovic in the final.

The 20-year-old, the youngest player with a ranking in the world's top 25, showed he could be a threat at the year's first major at Melbourne Park, where he is seeded 16.

The tall European had too many weapons for his 39th-ranked Argentine opponent, mixing an aggressive serve with deft touches at the net.

Mensik, who sent down 18 aces, broke once in each set and needed a fightback to win the tiebreak, saving three set points on the way.

He said he was thrilled with his serving game.

"After pre-season, obviously you're not in rhythm and you're coming for a season with a lot of energy," Mensik said in a court-side interview.

"So I'm super happy that I showed a performance that I wanted. Seb is a great fighter and it's super-difficult to hit a winner against him. I was able to stay focused and keep the spirit to the end."

Mensik opens his Australian Open campaign against Spain's Pablo Carreno Busta, while Baez meets big-serving Frenchman Giovanni Mpetshi Perricard.

Italy's Elisabetta Cocciaretto beat American Iva Jovic 6-4, 6-4 in another tune-up tournament in Hobart for her first WTA title since 2023.

Cocciaretto will meet Austria's Julia Grabher to get her Australian Open campaign underway while Jovic faces fellow American Katie Volynets.—Agencies

More medley gold for McIntosh, Marchand

LOS ANGELES: Olympic swim stars Summer McIntosh and Leon Marchand delivered another pair of dominant wins on Friday as they powered to 400m individual medley victories on the third day of the Pro Swim Series in Austin, Texas.

Canada's McIntosh, winner of three gold medals at the Paris Olympics and four titles at last year's World Championships in Singapore, crushed the field in the women's 400m medley, clocking 4:28.13 to beat American Emma Weyant, a two-time Olympic medallist herself, by 11.98sec.

The 19-year-old Canadian, who holds the world record of 4:23.65, cracked the 4:30 barrier in the event for the 11th time.

Marchand, who followed up his electrifying four-gold performance at the Paris Games with a medley double at the World Championships, won the men's 400 IM in 4:13.21 leading all the way to beat American Bobby Finke by 5.14 seconds.

Marchand and McIntosh, now both training in Austin with former Michael Phelps mentor Bob Bowman, had claimed 200m medley victories on Thursday.

Ireland's Daniel Wiffen won the men's 800m freestyle in 7:50.37 with Finke second in 7:51.50 in a battle of Olympic champions.

Wiffen, who won 800m free gold at the Paris Games, seized control early and held off Finke, who won the event at the Tokyo Games in 2021.

"The plan was to go out hard at the start and see if I could hold on," said Wiffen, who is now training in California. "I was able to hold on but I was dying at the end."

Ryan Erisman was third in 7:51.87, and returned barely more than half an hour later to win the 200m free in 1:46.66, his strong closing lap sealing a victory over world championships silver medalist Luke Hobson (1:47.31).

American Van Mathias won the men's 50m breaststroke in a quick 26.89sec with Kyrgyzstan's Denis Petrashov second in 27.12.

American Skylar Smith won the women's 50m breaststroke in 30.43, 33-hundredths of a second in front of reigning 100m breaststroke world champion Anna Elendt.—AFP

Martyn awake after being placed in coma due to meningitis

MELBOURNE: Former Australia batter Damien Martyn is up and walking again after being put into an induced coma last month to fight a serious case of meningitis with only a 50% chance of survival.

Known throughout his 14-year international career for his superb timing and effortless strokeplay, the 54-year-old said on Saturday that he had left his doctors in disbelief over how quickly he hit the deadly condition out of the park.

"On the 27th of December 2025 my life was taken out of my hands... when meningitis took over my brain, and unbeknownst to me I was placed into a paralysed coma for eight days to help me fight this awful disease. And I did! Fight, that is," Martyn posted on Facebook.

"After being given a 50-50 chance of surviving, I came out of the induced coma eight days later, not able to walk or talk. And yet, four days after that, with the doctors in disbelief, I walked, I talked and proved to them all why I should be released from hospital to start my recovery."

Martyn, who played 279 matches for Australia across all formats between 1992 and 2006 and scored 18 centuries, said he was grateful to all the doctors, nurses, paramedics, family members and friends who supported him through the difficult three weeks fighting the illness, an inflammation of the protective membranes surrounding the brain and spinal cord.

"This experience has reminded me of how fragile life is, how quickly everything can change and how precious time is," added Martyn, who won two 50-over World Cups with Australia. "Bring on 2026... I'm back!"—Reuters

Asjad stuns Asif as national snooker enters knockout stage

By Our Sports Reporter

KARACHI: Former champion Asjad Iqbal delivered the biggest upset of the tournament on Saturday, defeating in-form Mohammad Asif, as the group stage of the 50th National Snooker Championship concluded here at the NBP Sports Complex.

Asjad, the 2024 national champion, edged the three-time world champion Asif 4-3 in a nail-biting clash.

Asif, who held the tournament's high break of 134 until Friday, fought back from 3-1 down to force a decider, but Asjad held his nerve to clinch the final frame 65-33 and top the group.

The shocks continued as Shah Khan of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa toppled last year's runner-up Mohammad Sajjad 4-2.

Despite Sajjad crafting a 91 break in the fourth frame, Shah's consistent scoring sealed a significant victory, though it was not enough to secure a direct prequarter-final berth.

Defending champion Shahid Aftab ensured his smooth progression, overcoming Mohammad Yousaf 4-2 with the help of an 83 break. He heads directly into the last-16 as one of the top eight qualifiers.

The other players earning a bye to the pre-quarter-finals are Rana Irfan, Ali Hamza, Asjad, Ahsan Ramzan, Ahmar Tariq, Mubashir Raza and Sohail Shehzad.

The remaining 16 qualifiers will contest the last-24 round on Sunday.

The last-24 round will see Asif facing Zulfiqar A. Qadir and the exciting Hasnain Akhtar taking on Asif Toba. Other key matches pit Sajjad against Sultan Mohammad and Awaisullah Munir, who scored two centuries (102 and 100) in a 4-2 triumph, against Zaib Khan.

In other final group matches, Awaisullah's century-powered win over Zulfiqar was matched by Mohammad Shahbaz, who fired a 111 break in his victory. Abdul Javed won a seven-frame thriller against Aakash Rafique, while Mohammad Faizan routed Mohammad Farhan 4-0.

The knockout stage begins on Sunday morning, with the winners of the last-24 round joining the top eight in the pre-quarterfinals.